

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 6, 2014

The Honorable Eric Shinseki  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20420-0001

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I write about a wonderful chance to create good-paying jobs for veterans in Southeast Alaska and, unfortunately, a puzzling and poorly-reasoned denial of this opportunity by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Recently, I was contacted by representatives from the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) about their application to have a new Maritime and Multi-Skilled Worker credential program formally recognized by the VA, so Alaska's veterans might get training and then access to maritime jobs. Unfortunately, despite providing additional clarification about the nature of the program, an appeal of the initial denial of the application was also denied.

I believe the denial of this application is based upon an acute misunderstanding of the nature of the credential program in question. Moreover, the denial reflects an overall lack of understanding of the employment situation in Southeast Alaska and the needs of employers and veteran job-seekers alike. I am enclosing a copy of the denial letter and urge you to review it.

The Maritime and Multi-Skilled Worker credential program, which was approved by the Chancellor under the authority of the University of Alaska Board of Regents, was developed through collaboration between UAS Ketchikan, the United States Coast Guard and the Ketchikan Indian Community, as well as potential employers like the Alaska Marine Highway System, Alaska Ship and Dry Dock, and VIGOR Industrial, the leading shipbuilding and repair company in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest. Through this collaboration, employers worked with UAS Ketchikan to identify the specific skills they require in potential new hires, and the credential program is carefully tailored to reflect these needs and ensure students are well positioned to obtain gainful employment immediately upon graduation.

The Honorable Eric Shinseki

March 6, 2014

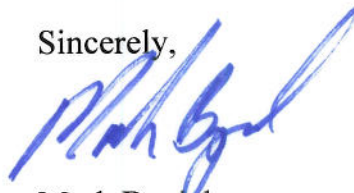
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Let me be clear: these are good-paying jobs in an area of Alaska that is still recovering from the loss of most of its timber industry, including the closure of a pulp mill which was its largest employer. Much of the area's economic recovery occurred in the maritime sector, with the development of a shipyard and the relocation of the Alaska Marine Highway System headquarters to Ketchikan. These jobs aren't going anywhere. To the contrary, demand for qualified workers in these areas is so high that over 30 percent of workers in these fields are non-Alaskans. In fact, the need to secure qualified workers to replace an aging workforce in these industries is so great that the employers themselves have indicated that they are willing to provide scholarship support for these students. To deny veterans a chance to be part of this dynamic and growing sector of the Southeast Alaska economy is shortsighted, unfair, and wrong.

As a member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, I have supported and voted for legislation to train and hire veterans. In those committee hearings I have heard you testify about your priority to get veterans working, and I take you at your word. And in recent speeches, President Obama has signaled a new emphasis on the need for a full spectrum of postsecondary educational opportunities, including viable workforce training options. If the Administration is serious about this approach and its commitment to our nation's veterans, I urge the VA to take a much closer look at the UAS application – and then approve it quickly.

Thank you for attention to this matter. I look forward to your response. Please feel free to contact my office any time.

Sincerely,



Mark Begich  
United States Senator

CC: The Honorable Allison Hickey  
Enclosure





**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**VA Regional Office**  
**P.O. Box 8888**  
**Muskogee OK 74402-8888**

January 16, 2014

In Reply Refer To: 351/224

**PRISCILLA SCHULTE**  
**UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA SOUTHEAST**  
**11120 GLACIER HIGHWAY**  
**JUNEAU, AK 99801**

Dear Ms. Schulte:

Our office received your second approval request for the Non College Degree program, Maritime & Multi-Skilled Worker Workforce Credential, on January 10, 2014. The information submitted has been reviewed. However, your program does not meet approval requirements of 38 CFR 21.4252 for the following reason(s):

CFR 22.4252 requires as follows;

- (a) Bartending and personality development.** Enrollment will not be approved in any bartending or personality development course.
- (b) Avocational and recreational.** Enrollment will not be approved in any course which is avocational or recreational in character or the advertising for which contains significant avocational or recreational themes. The courses identified in paragraphs (b)(1), (2), and (3) of this section are presumed to be avocational or recreational in character and require justification for their pursuit.

The Maritime and Multi-Skilled Worker program is avocational and a personality development course in that it does not lead to a specific educational objective. Instead it prepares individuals to be more attractive to future employers. In Captain J. P. Novotny's approval letter, he indicates that applicants that complete your QMED course "will satisfy the requirements of 46 CFR 12.15-7(b)(2) and receive credit for 90 days of the sea service needed" for the endorsement, but adds, "PROVIDED they also present evidence of at least 90 days engine room service." The Multi-Skilled worker only contributes to legal requirements of the certification, your facility does not provide the certification, and is not in itself leading to a vocational objective.

Further, your facilities own description of the course states, "The Maritime and Multi-Skilled Worker" workforce credential program will provide students with an introduction to basic industrial skills that can be applied to occupations in ship building, mining, seafood processing plants, and marine engine rooms as well as other heavy industrial occupations."

There is no question that workforce credentials are valuable and I am sure your facility provides high quality professional education, but it is for the reasons stated above, I cannot approve the Maritime and Multi-Skilled Worker program.

If you have any questions, or want to resubmit an approval request, please contact me by telephone at (918) 781-7827 or by email at [Wayne.Boettcher@va.gov](mailto:Wayne.Boettcher@va.gov).

Sincerely yours,

Wayne Boettcher  
Education Liaison Representative

Enclosure: Approval Packet